

THE THRILLING ADVENTURES OF DICK ANTHONY OF ASTRABAD

By TALBOT MUNDY

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As he watched the stricken enemy sink off toward the skyline and knew there would be vengeance later on, Dick Anthony was not averse to the future than his thought of flinching from his own half-drilled rabble.

He admitted to himself now that his two quick victories within a week meant little more than two spur marks on Russia's hide.

He had to stir if he was to save Persia from the Russian yoke. Action, and only action, swift, unexpected and well-planned—could help him in Persia.

Russian dead and wounded lay scattered over two square miles of plain, and the walled city of Astrabad lay helpless for the taking.

His ragged line stood still, gazing in wonder at him in the flash of his new success, gaining belief, now more than ever of Ubeeg Ali Khan's wild story, that made him Alexander of Macedonia reincarnated. But he cantered down among the spaced-out companies, letting the sunlight flash along the blade of his strange jeweled claymore, and his voice was like the crackling of a great whip, as he made his will known, his seat in the saddle that of a man who is obeyed.

"Back!" he ordered. "Back to your hills again!"

"Let them loot, bahadur!" Ubeeg Ali Khan advised, riding up to Dick's side.

Dick wheeled on him, spinning his big bow in one of those swift movements that were as disconcerting as they were characteristic.

"I made you second in command! Who are you doing now? Take the left wing and answer for your men's behavior! Join your command, sir!"

Without a word, Dick turned to the far end of the other wing where his seven hundred horsemen were massed up and Ubeeg Ali Khan, leaning forward, swearing oaths at the machine gun.

"Where was Mr. Dicky?"

"Dick reined in and the huge man laid a hand on the Russian's shoulder. "Back to the hills, Andy. Are your men in hand?"

"On my word!"

"Then lead the way! Lead off with your gun! Back along the way we came!"

"But Mr. Dicky—"

"What?"

"Man! Her that's waitin' wumman on the princess yonder!"

"Dick looked at the horizon. A cloud of dark dust curled and eddied above a low hill and stampeding Cossacks, beyond the Russian lines, were playing with him until he was outwitted. It was only human to connect the princess and her maid together in one comprehensive thought, and Dick, for the moment, forgot the maid had fallen victim to the Russian's charms—that she was a girl, a Russian girl, and that she had already given proof of her devotion.

"Did you hear my order?"

"Ay, Stan by yr traces, there! Take hold!"

Sixty-three men sprang from the ground to do his bidding instantly, and Dick rode to where all the Russian reserve ammunition was stored, on commissariat wagons, hauled from the stables of Russian officers.

"Forward!" he ordered, pointing to the hills, and the cavalcade began to move.

At the far end of the other wing Ubeeg Ali swallowed his own thoughts of plunder and forced Dick's will on men whose ideal might be Persia, but whose immediate yearning, like his own, was for the loot in Astrabad bazaars.

"Bismillah!" he muttered in his beard. "The fellow strokes his stubborn chin, looks up once to heaven, and then knows what he's doing. Tell tales of him that I invented and the tales prove true ones! I prophesy about him, and the prophecy comes true! Who am I that I should doubt the hand of Allah? Nay—I am a soldier and I have my duty!"

He rode like a thunderbolt, once up and once again down the line, shouting for close order, and since close order presaged movement of the kind they obeyed him readily enough.

Dick halted the cavalcade, and the horses could no longer drag the heavy wagons, and he kept up with the climbing infantry.

He ordered the wounded taken from the wagons and carried to the rear, and he served out two hundred rounds of ammunition, and told off carriers. Next, he ordered the commissariat boxes, and he served out two hundred rounds of ammunition, and told off carriers. Next, he ordered the commissariat boxes, and he served out two hundred rounds of ammunition, and told off carriers.

"Now guard them for me until my return!" Dick ordered, riding down to where the Russian reserve ammunition was stored, on commissariat wagons, hauled from the stables of Russian officers.

"Lead off with the horse!" he ordered. "Throw out the Russian reserve ammunition, and the best way to get it is to lead off with the horse!"

"Now! Tention! Listen!"

They had been leaning on their rifles, but now they were up and standing like drilled men.

"Yonder is the Russian reserve ammunition, and the best way to get it is to lead off with the horse!"

"Forward!"

Up, up Dick led, but said nothing and answered questions. No one knew where he came on the advance guard, waiting for them on the plateau, and Ubeeg Ali Khan rode back to him, and trail all clear, would Dick give any details of his plan.

He called a halt at last when he reached the Russian reserve ammunition, and the best way to get it is to lead off with the horse!"

"Bahadur, I am second in command; my I not know the secret? I have Ubeeg Ali. Am I likely to betray confidence?"

Dick smiled. He knew well the Afghan's loyalty. But he knew, too, who had told those utterly amazing tales about Iskander coming to life again, and he judged that such poetic imagination would be better not too freely fed. Dick wanted his army quiet—incurious—at rest.

too suspicious by dawn I'll know the truth. Help me pick watchmen now! I'll all your wits—no need eyes, ears and silence!"

Then as Gideon once did in Bible story, Dick took steps to choose a handful from his host on whom he could depend. He and Ubeeg Ali went here and there, here and there, and out among the companies, looking for men whose eyes were sharp and still, and who were not too tired to answer just with jest.

It took them two hours to pick a hundred and fifty men, but at last they had three fifty-man platoons to take the strain in turn, and then they pushed a living fringe forward, beyond the low foothills to the hot plain. Dick posted them, though Ubeeg Ali went with him to assist and Ubeeg Ali listened to the orders that he gave; but the Afghan learned little.

"Now for the closest watch that ever army kept!" commanded Dick. "The man caught nodding dies! The man caught sleeping dies! The man caught talking dies! I'm short of good sergeants!"

"I'll watch as the night birds watch for mice!" they promised.

"Two hours!" said Dick. "Four—then, two hours—watch again!"

When the last fixed post had been attended and the night watchmen were back through the gathering gloom to the foot of the overhanging cliff, where they should be, Dick turned to himself, raised on four left sticks.

"I'm going to sleep here," he said, "where I can see the night birds, and I'll sleep until dawn!"

"It is an order, Ubeeg Ali!"

So the Afghan went, regretfully—always fully—away from long wakefulness, and soon his snoring sang second to Ubeeg Ali's snoring. The whole host was sleeping almost before the sun went under, and none but the shadow lurking under the eaves of the cliff, where the four horsemen, one by one, were racing along the plain at chance, uncertain intervals.

Dick's orders were for silence and no attempt was made to shoot the gallows, three slipped by untouched. So the sound of the three hoofs, thunder, gathered confidence. He rode full peit into the trap, and he was quickly broken to him, and whether he broke it or not, he reported him to Dick as dead. When they had torn out the clothing from his body, they discovered a letter tucked in his sock, and hurried to Dick with it.

"What's that?"

"The reward, Dick—leaping from his bed before they were within ten paces of him—promoted all five instantly."

Then he struck match after match, and turned his fingers in the place of a match, and he was quickly broken to him, and whether he broke it or not, he reported him to Dick as dead. When they had torn out the clothing from his body, they discovered a letter tucked in his sock, and hurried to Dick with it.

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"What's that?"

The Lancing of the Whale

od. They started at an easy walk—six guns, one following the other, with an extra ammunition wagon to each gun and a considerable convey of provisions.

A second trumpet sounded for the trot, and for perhaps four hundred yards the column jogged and bumped along, with heavy wagons jolting in the wake, making the dull, rumbling thunder that rides ever with artillery. Then an officer of the advance saw something on the ridge ahead that awakened his curiosity.

Instead of sending an alarm back, and letting the guns halt until he had investigated, he galloped ahead alone, and as he spurred—tired to a sickly Dick Anthony led his seven hundred horsemen at a walk behind the other ridge. Now, the Russians were between two hidden bodies of an enemy and absolutely unsuspecting of the fact.

The officer rode on and nothing happened. He reached the edge at a point where low bushes crowned it. He rode up and disappeared. No body heard the yell for help as he was dragged from his horse and knifed, no body heard the news of his capture for the jackals finished it that night.

The rest of the battery continued to advance, wholly ignorant of the fact that a machine gun whose mechanism was being worked by a canny, careful Scot. The Cossacks loomed their

She believed Dick Anthony behind that row of fires.

Reasoning, in her wild, swift-twisting way, ignoring facts and trusting Dick was afraid to keep the city he had won. She believed him now to be waiting for reinforcements, and perhaps to be arguing with a swarm of discontented men. The only alternative suggestion she could make was that he meant to watch for the returning guns and then slip back to his mountain top where he would think that he was safe.

She wrote another message and sent six more gallopers careering through the night, and this time each bore a little map that showed the line of the Russian retreat. The infantry were told, instead of following the guns, to climb into the foothills—hunt for Dick's trail—and lie on it in ambush.

Feverish hands, she knew, were laboring at the wires that had been cut. Within an hour from midnight she expected to be in touch again with Petersburg and the secret, swift-pulsing heart of the Russian world.

The thought was disquieting. But that thought brought others, and it seemed to her she had won! From the first the plan had been to

make Dick Anthony an outlaw, so that Russia—or rather the Okhrana, that is the Russian secret police—could bring down more troops to Persia. What more excuse was wanted for the capture of Persia by a strike corps?

She began to see now that her vengeance on Dick Anthony might be accomplished better while at the same time making her own position doubly strong with the Okhrana.

Through the dark, stifling streets she ran swiftly, though entirely unafraid, to a palace that had been assigned to her for quarters before she came to Astrabad.

There in a strong box that was screwed to a heavy table, there were papers that contained the whole Russian depositions as well as a chart of Persia's weaknesses.

She opened the box now and chuckled as she drew her finger over the map, sweeping every other minute at the motto that fluttered against the lamp of oil lined on her secret papers. Suddenly she slipped the map back in its envelope and called her

"Sit there!"

The princess pointed to a chair at the foot of the bed, and the maid sat on it, leaning both arms on the bed.

"Write!"

With deft fingers, now she took dictation, writing in longhand, but she said that the princess scarcely had to pause. The princess spoke with her eyes on the wall in front—as if she were dictating the future—and she did not notice that her secret papers. Suddenly she slipped the map back in its envelope and called her

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and he had heard too much from the prince's scout an army corps all ready to cross over the border not to believe in its existence.

"Get those hidden guns along the ridge!" he ordered. "We'll wait here for those Cossack regiments!"

He rode ahead, and he did not know what new plans the prince might have made, nor what reinforcements he might have summoned, he sent twenty men along the ridge, under the cover of a night march, to an ambush, or a mile, the endurance of a horse and could guess within a reasonable fraction of the limit of a man.

What had been a cruel march from Astrabad was scarcely more than a pleasant gallop back again. In the cool of the night the horses were still fresh enough to tackle the march, and it was long before midnight when the leading scout caught sight of a watchfire burning in a section of the ridge.

He galloped back to report all well, and nothing less than Dick's armor could have burst out from the column.

Dick went to the ridge and led them along in silence, and it was he who answered the challenge of a sentry half a mile before he reached the barricade.

"Salam, bahadur!" said a deep voice when the barricade was near. "You, Yusuf Ali?"

"All well?"

"Good!" said Dick. "Leave fifty of your men here. Then take the rest and hurry to Ubeeg Ali's aid. He needs you!"

"Where, bahadur?"

"Back along the ridge we came. Yes—now—tonight!"

Olga Karagevich took hold of the reins of government in Astrabad and held them with a grip that would have done credit to a practiced ruler of another sea.

She had enough men there to hold the place now against any new attack, and she was not a little proud of her own men, not enough men by a long way to let her dare assume the offensive until she had a better chance.

She sent telegram after telegram to Russia along the mended wire, urging that the army corps be started on its way.

In proof of how careful the Russian plans had all been laid for the capture of Persia, she showed Olga Karagevich, a gunboat with troops on board began to arrive and drop anchor in the day after her telegram was sent.

She was seized with a yearning to have it out with Dick, to capture and torture him and kill him with her own hands before the army corps should come. She was not a little proud of her own men, not enough men by a long way to let her dare assume the offensive until she had a better chance.

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him!" ordered Dick. "If he surrenders, take him and his men up to our camp in the mountain top and keep him there. I shall be perfectly satisfied if I find him in the same place."

The four hundred rode off, and the only man who had the least idea of the nature of the work ahead, was Dick, who rode in the rear of them.

He rode ahead, and he did not know what new plans the prince might have made, nor what reinforcements he might have summoned, he sent twenty men along the ridge, under the cover of a night march, to an ambush, or a mile, the endurance of a horse and could guess within a reasonable fraction of the limit of a man.

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